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Shining Lights in Dark Times: Women Journalists from the 1880s to Today

by Barb Howe

At the turn of the last century, newspapers were the social media apps of their time. They could bring communities together, shape public opinion, and instigate important social and political reforms. But in the late 19th and early 20th century, these tools were overwhelmingly in the hands of upper-class white men. While it was not uncommon for women to write domestic columns focusing on topics such as homemaking and cooking, a few notable women were able to do more, becoming investigative journalists, editors, and even owners of newspapers. They used their voices to challenge the injustices they saw around them, improve their communities, and raise the status of women in society.

Here in Florida, **Lillian Carlisle West** (1884-1970) and **Marie Holderman** (1884-1968) are notable for becoming owners and publishers of major newspapers in their communities before women even had the right to vote. West ran The *Panama City Pilot* and two other panhandle newspapers for about 20 years after her husband died, and used the platform to support Prohibition, women's suffrage, and an end to the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan. Holderman owned *The Cocoa Tribune* for nearly 50 years.

Photo provided by Nancy Hudson

Lillian Carlisle West published and managed three Florida panhandle newspapers until the mid-1930s.

George Mortimer West was a land developer who bought a newspaper to promote growth in Florida's panhandle communities. He and his wife, Lillian, built the first brick building constructed in St. Andrews: the Panama City Publishing Company. (It is still in existence today and now operates as a museum.) Lillian supported her husband in running *The Panama City Pilo*t for many years, and by 1917 she became the managing editor. They also managed two other local papers: the *St. Andrews Bay New*s and the *Lynn Haven Free Press*. All three papers editorialized in support of women's suffrage, ending government corruption, and reigning in the power of big business. After the passage of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote, Lillian Carlisle West became the first woman registered to vote in her precinct. When George died in 1926, Lillian continued to publish and manage the newspapers until the mid-1930s.

Marie Holderman, who built and lived in Haywire House, was founder and publisher of *The Cocoa Tribune*. Photo provided by Florida Today

Historic Haywire House

Holderman and her husband built Haywire House across the street from The *Cocoa Tribune*'s offices. A two-story mansion built out of old wood pine, the house became a hub for social activities. The dining room walls were decorated with murals of Florida scenery painted in the 1930s. The historic house still stands today as a private residence. You can see photos of the house on the website of The *Cocoa Tribune*'s legacy magazine, *Florida Today*. Search for key words "historic haywire house cocoa."

On the east coast, **Marie Ringo Holderman** purchased a newspaper in 1917, in a little fishing village in Brevard County after her husband was injured in an accident and unable to work. At the time, Cocoa Beach had a population of less than a thousand people.

Holderman became a very influential woman, and her support of the creation of Sebastian inlet, which connects the Indian River to the Atlantic, was instrumental to the completion of that project. In 1925, she was elected president of the South Florida Press Association, a significant event that was noted in the national trade magazine *Editor & Publisher*.

Photo provided by Wikipedia

Mary Hayes Davis, Reporter and successful author of several children's books in LaBelle, Florida. (1884-1948)

Another notable newspaper woman of the early 20th century includes a woman by the name of **Mary Hayes Davis**, who purchased *The Hendry County News*, in South Florida, in 1920. Davis had worked as a reporter on newspapers up north and was a successful author of several children's books. Her tenure as local newspaper woman in LaBelle, Florida, was marked by a tragic event that illustrates the brutality of the country's racial tensions of the time. The story goes

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The Battle of Gainesville

by Sam Chappell

Part 2 of 2 (continued from Jan-Feb 2026 issue)

Having trailed the Federal column all night, Dickison's Confederate horsemen arrived at the outskirts of Gainesville at approximately 7:00 a.m. Warned of the enemy's approach by his pickets posted south of town, Colonel Harris attempted to reorient his command in a southerly direction—the 75th Ohio in front, the 4th Massachusetts in reserve, and the single field piece placed near the road in the center of the line. Meanwhile, about one mile away, Dickison made his own dispositions. Captain Rou and Lieutenant McCardell would move up the left to capture the railroad depot, Lieutenant McEaddy would attack on the right, with Lieutenant Dozier in the center. Lieutenant Bruton's section of artillery would open the contest by throwing two shells into the enemy pickets and then advancing with the rest of the command. Dickison dismounted his entire force for the attack with the exception of Lieutenant McEaddy's platoon on the right.[12]

Harris was still placing the men of the 75th Ohio when the attack broke. Private Southerton described the position: "All around was open ground, not a tree, not a fence."[13] Although the Ohioans repulsed Dickison's furious opening attack in front, McEaddy's mounted rebels managed to circle to the north of town. Harris responded by sending Company B, 4th Massachusetts Cavalry from its reserve position behind the 75th Ohio to check this new threat. Also, to prevent his hundred-yard battle line along the railroad from being surrounded, he threw back portions of the 75th on both the left and right flanks. This bought the Union defense some protection from Confederates making their way around each end of the line, but at the cost of weakening the front.[14]

The line thus held for nearly an hour and a half, until relentless Confederate pressure drove the Federals back. Pushed from this first position near the railroad, the Union cavalrymen

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Women, from Cover

like this: During the land boom of the 1920s, several new roads were needed to accommodate expected growth in the area, and local residents (who were mostly white) were angered by contractors bringing in workers, including many Black men, from outside the community. On May 11, 1926, one of those workers, a young Black man by the name of Henry Patterson, walked over to a nearby house to ask for a glass of water. A white woman who lived there, Hattie Crawford, panicked at the sight of him and ran out of the house. Neighbors heard her screams and assumed Patterson had tried to assault the woman. Patterson fled and hid in the woods while a couple hundred white residents gathered to search for Ms. Crawford's alleged assailant. Patterson was found by the town marshal who turned him over to the angry crowd. They put him in a car and paraded through town, stopping at the houses of significant personages of Labelle including a state legislator and a county commissioner. At one house, Patterson was allowed to run a few steps away before the men in the mob opened fire. He was not killed instantly but recaptured, and the gruesome parade continued.

Davis was standing in the door of her newspaper office when the mob rode by. Once again Patterson was allowed to temporarily break free, and he ran up to Davis pleading for help. According to several sources, she said, "Man, I cannot help you. Pray to your God" before his captors dragged him away again. When it was all over, Patterson's body was so shredded with bullets the coroner could only say he had been shot between 50 to 100 times. The cause of death was noted as "killed by a mob and hung after dead in city limits of LaBelle on May 11, 1926."

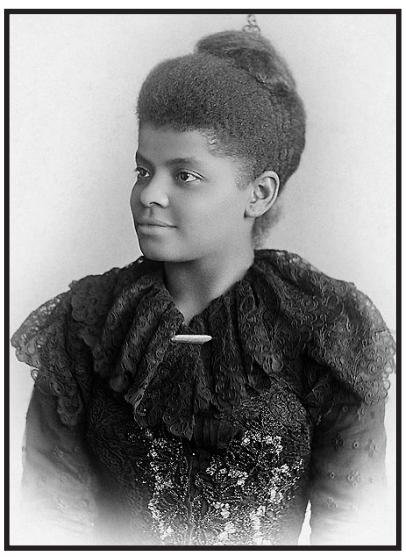
Later, Davis testified to a grand jury that was convened to consider prosecuting some of the men. Ultimately, as was the case with most lynchings, the community was complacent and the perpetrators went unpunished, but Davis did not have the reaction of many of her neighbors. Instead, she wrote about the lynching in great detail in her newspaper. News of the gruesome crime spread as far away as Los Angeles and New York. *The Tampa Tribune* called Davis a "brave and undaunted woman" for covering the lynching:

> "All honor to Mary Hayes Davis who publishes and edits the *Hendry County News* of Labelle. Just after the outbreak of mob law in that town, an effort was made to intimidate this good woman and prevent the publication in her paper of the facts of the lynching. Circles of blood were drawn on the door of the News office and a chisel thrust through it. She was repeatedly warned not to print the story.
>
> "What did Mary Hayes Davis do? In the next issue of her paper she printed on the first page a graphic description of the gruesome work of the mob—a story showing it to have been one of the most unprovoked, brutal, and cowardly crimes ever committed . . . " *Tampa Tribune*

A hundred years after his death, the killing of Henry Patterson is memorialized on a website created by local students, lynchinginlabelle.com. The only memorial in the community itself is a bench with a plaque that reads "to the memory of Henry Patterson who died on May 11, 1926, in LaBelle, and Herbert Rider (the county prosecutor), and Wesley C. Richards (the county judge who convened the inquest) who tried to bring those responsible to justice."

Mary Hayes Davis probably remembered that day for the rest of her life. Her actions helped shine a light on a gruesome crime and reflect the influence of **Ida B. Wells** (1862-1931), a Black woman who wrote about lynchings in the 1880s. Born into slavery, Wells worked as a teacher in Tennessee, but began writing weekly articles for a local paper under the pen name "Iola." In 1889, she co-founded a paper called *The Free Speech and Headlight* based in Memphis. After three of her friends were falsely accused of a crime and lynched for competing with white-owned businesses, Wells began interviewing people about lynchings around the South. By compiling statistics from newspapers and court records, she pioneered the use of data-driven investigative journalism.

It is difficult to overestimate the challenges Black women like Wells faced in doing this type of work. Lynching was largely socially acceptable in the South at the time. Large crowds of white people often joined in creating a festive atmosphere around lynchings. Photographs were taken and postcards were made to commemorate the event. Newspaper editorials often supported these acts of extrajudicial killings, as *The Fayetteville Observer* did in 1868, writing "the community said amen to the act [of lynching]—it was just and right. We know not who did it, whether the Ku Klux Klan or the immediate neighbors, but we feel they were only instruments of Divine vengeance."



Ida B. Wells (1862-1931)

Publicity is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases. —Justice Louis D. Brandeis

Writing passionately and fearlessly about things that were not spoken of in polite (white) society, Wells became a role model not only for Mary Hayes Davis, but for a long line of other Black journalists such as **Ethyl Payne** of Chicago, (1911-1991) who wrote for *The Chicago Defender*. Payne was not just a local reporter, she became a White House correspondent, traveling extensively and writing about national and international affairs. She covered the Montgomery bus boycott, school desegregation efforts in Little Rock, Arkansas, and the 1963 March on Washington for civil rights.

In 1964, Payne attended the signing by President Johnson of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, where the President gave her one of the pens he used to sign the legislation. Photo from Wikipedia

Blending activism with journalism Payne became a prominent organizer of the civil rights movement, working alongside Philip A. Randolph and Bayard Rustin to pressure the federal government to desegregate its work force in the 1940s. Today Payne is best remembered as the "First Lady of the Black Press," a small-statured (5'2") woman who met with presidents and challenged the country to work towards overcoming discrimination.

In our own time, this tradition continues and can be seen in the reporting of Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor, two women journalists who broke the story of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's decades-long trail of sexual abuse of young female actors. Thanks to Twohey's and Kantor's investigative reporting in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, Weinstein was charged, tried, and convicted of third-degree rape and a criminal sexual act in the first degree, and sentenced to 23 years in prison in New York state. He also faced separate charges in Los Angeles where he was convicted and sentenced to an additional 16 years in California. The 2022 movie *She Said* is an excellent portrayal of how investigative journalism works by carefully tracking down evidence, verifying claims, and protecting vulnerable sources who dare to speak out.

Megan Twohey

Jodi Kantor

The legacy of Ida B. Wells lives on in women like these. Their actions stand as a model for all who live in a world where people do horrible things to other people because of fear and prejudice. No single one of us may be able to physically stop any particular act of violence we witness happening around us in the moment, but we can use our voices, our pens, and our words to call out abuse and injustice whenever it happens, whether in rural Florida, New York and Los Angeles, or Minneapolis.

That's what good journalists do. They shine lights onto shameful things that no one wants to acknowledge or talk about. They do this so that injustice is not allowed to fester in dark corners, communities can heal, and humanity can get better.

Barb Howe is a Gainesville-based writer with a PhD in Politics and International Affairs. Barb may be reached at: barb@barbhowe.com

Note to Readers: Complete resource material in pdf format is available upon request, for anyone interested in further study.

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